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CIA Agents Gather In El Paso For Unusual Reunion

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EL PASO, Texas

About three dozen former "spooks" — retired CIA agents — have gathered openly here for an unusual reunion.

The retirees, who belong to the Lone Star Chapter of the Central Intelligence Agency, aren't trigger-happy rogues, and the gathering is nothing sinister, retired Col. Vincent Lockhart said.

Instead, the three-day reunion was set up simply so former undercover agents who now live in Texas, like Lockhart, could talk quietly among their own kind.

"It's kind of a relief to talk to people who remember what we did and didn't do," the 68-year-old Lockhart said.

Lockhart served as an assistant to CIA Director Allen Dulles nearly 30 years ago, and says only that he was "overseas" when the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba failed in 1961.

Lockhart said the 19 years he spent with the CIA were "95 percent sweat and 5 percent glamour." He retired in 1972, shortly before the Watergate scandal disclosed little-known details of the agency's domestic spying.

"I retired at the right time," he admitted. His final tour of duty was four years in war-torn Vietnam, and he was in Saigon at the time of the bloody Tet offensive in 1968.

In addition to Vietnam, Lockhart said he visited about 60 nations for the CIA. But he declines to call himself a CIA agent. "We were all employees," he said. "Serving your country through the CIA" is what Lockhart terms his highest achievement.

Lockhart worked briefly for an Amarillo newspaper before serving in the Army in the early 1940s. He was recruited for the CIA shortly after World War II, but discounts spy authors' beliefs that most CIA agents are similar to fictional British agent James Bond.

"Allen Dulles loved the James Bond movies," he said.

The other CIA retirees gathered at an El Paso inn near the airport aren't as talkative as Lockhart, who won't discuss the four years he served as an undercover agent.

The Lone Star Chapter of the CIA has about 50 members scattered throughout Texas. Printed programs advise former agents that they are free to hide from inquiring television or newspaper cameras trying to catch a glimpse of them during their stay through Saturday.